KRAUT ON ARISTOTLE ON HAPPINESS

Why should a review of a book on Aristotle's view of the human good find a place in a journal of Greek political thought? Because any account of Aristotle's political thought must begin with his conception of the human good:

Since politics employs the other sciences, and also legisitates as to what we should do and what we should refrain from, its end will embrace the ends of the other sciences, and will therefore be the human good. (Nicomachean Ethics [N.E.] I.2, 1094b4-7; see Politics III.12, 1282b14-18')

Aristotle's views on the human good are far from straightforward. Most notoriously, there is an apparent conflict between the advocacy of the life of ethical virtue and that of the life of contemplation. Any attempt to resolve this conflict will involve the interpretation of many difficult passages, and the attempts made over the last few years, especially since John Cooper's Reason and Human Good in Aristotle in 1975, have generated a vast literature. Richard Kraut's book is the latest addition to this corpus, surpassing anything so far written in its comprehensiveness.

Kraut urges that we assume the N.E. to be a unity (p.20; see p.103). This is sensible, since the Book X discussion of happiness refers back to that in Book I (X.6, 1176a32-3; c.f. X.7, 1177a18-19). Kraut also suggests that we should assume the work to be internally consistent, until proven inconsistent. Again, I do not object to this, though we might remember that what we have from Aristotle is based on lecture notes and that he might have been ready to 'save the phainomena' at the price of a few loose ends.
On the basis of these assumptions, Kraut argues that Aristotle held that:

(i) the life of the philosopher and that of the politician are both happy (ch.1);

(ii) the more contemplative activity a life contains, the happier that life is (ch.1);

(iii) both lives are happy because of their resemblance to the intellectual life of the gods (chs.1 and 6);

(iv) egoism is false (ch.2);

(v) contemplation does not represent an exclusive alternative to other goods such as ethical activity and friendship, but maximizing contemplation is the way to organize these subordinate ends into a coherent system (ch.3);

(vi) the view of happiness that it includes all intrinsic goods is incorrect (chs.4-5);

(vii) the "function" argument of 1.7 provides the basis for a defence of both the philosophical and the political lives (ch.6);

(viii) reasoning well constitutes the mean at which we should aim in our actions (ch.6).

A good deal of what Kraut says I find persuasive, in particular much of his interpretation of 1.7 (in setting out thesis (vii)). And his thoughts on the doctrine of the mean (thesis (viii)) are highly suggestive. But I think that Kraut's overall view of Aristotle on the human good is intellectualist to an unacceptable degree, largely because he places too much importance on a particular view of Aristotelian theology. I shall try to develop this criticism below. My sections 1 - 4 correspond to theses (i) - (iv) above. In section 5, I discuss thesis (vi). My view of thesis (v) should emerge in the discussion as a whole.

Before criticizing Kraut's book, however, I want to note its excellence. No serious student of Aristotle's ethical philosophy will be